Enhancing the effectiveness of multistakeholder platforms

Final report

Joost Guijt

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The “Enhancing the effectiveness of multistakeholder platforms” research program looked at current evidence and perceptions on how effectively multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) contribute to agrifood (system) transitions to sustainability. Much is invested in MSPs as a way to respond to complex challenges. While there is a great need to assess their effectiveness, there is no robust way of doing so. The project worked with platforms to see how to credibly assess their contribution, so they can become more effective. In doing so it developed readily applicable guidelines that agrifood MSPs can work with, largely using existing capacities and data.

In het onderzoeksprogramma "Verbetering van de effectiviteit van multistakeholder platforms" is gekeken naar de huidige gegevens en percepties over hoe effectief multistakeholder platforms (MSP's) bijdragen aan agrifood (systeem)transities naar duurzaamheid. Er wordt veel geïnvesteerd in MSP's als antwoord op complexe uitdagingen. Hoewel er een dus grote behoefte is om hun effectiviteit te beoordelen, is er geen robuuste manier om dit te doen. Het project werkte met platforms om te zien hoe hun bijdrage op een geloofwaardige manier kan worden beoordeeld, zodat ze effectiever kunnen worden. Daarbij heeft het project gemakkelijk toepasbare richtlijnen ontwikkeld waarmee agrofood MSP's kunnen werken, waarbij grotendeels gebruik wordt gemaakt van bestaande capaciteiten en gegevens.

Keywords: multistakeholder platform, multistakeholder partnership, effectiveness, MEL, assessment

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P.O. Box 88, 6700 AB Wageningen, The Netherlands. T + 31 (0)317 48 68 00, E info.cdi@wur.nl,
www.wur.eu/cdi.

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Executive summary

The “Enhancing the effectiveness of multistakeholder platforms” research program looked at current evidence and perceptions on how effectively multi-stakeholder platforms contribute to agrifood (system) transitions to sustainability in relation. It also worked with platforms to see how to credibly assess their contribution, so they can become more effective. In doing so it developed readily applicable guidelines that agrifood MSPs can work with largely using existing capacities and data.

The kind of complex challenges the food and agriculture sector is faced with increasingly asks for approaches that can respond effectively to related complexities. Much is invested in multi-stakeholder platforms as one way of responding to these high-level challenges, as no single actor is able to deal with many of the critical problems. However, there is a great need to assess their contribution to inclusive and sustainable development, and to assess what makes for platforms that effectively contribute to the challenges they were set up to deal with.

A global, structured scan of agrifood MSPs working towards greater sustainability and/or inclusion found some 45 such platforms, of which 38 had somewhat credible evaluation information. Most were set up in response to generic, systemic challenges at a sectoral, national or global scale. While their intention is to address systemic change, this is often not clearly captured in a public Theory of Change. In combination with often limited evaluation data, this makes it not possible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness or not of the platforms scanned. A literature review also pointed to the lack of robust studies assessing the effectiveness of MSPs. It is therefore problematic to conclude whether MSPs are a more effective, or even necessary, means to address systemic challenges in food system transformation than more common programmatic or business-based collaborations.

In-depth studies with four MSPs lead to the development of an approach that would make it possible to say more about MSP effectiveness. This approach would also help such platforms remain focused on their system change intentions. Platform leadership must see this as a strategic goal, not a monitoring & evaluation activity. Platform funders – donors and funding members – must also support such system-oriented reflection, rather than seeking operational monitoring data. No real progress will be made in assessing MSPs, however, until there is a widespread imperative to look beyond the simple narrative that “complex, systemic challenges can be more effectively tackled by multistakeholder partnerships than single actors”.

Project period

April 2016 – January 2019

1 Milestones and progress

1.1 Agreed Milestones

The following milestones were agreed upon. Achievements with respect to each milestone is specified.

Milestone 1

Research focus and methodology finalised.

Deliverables: Detailed research plan and initial analytical framework.

Achievements: A detailed workplan was completed in the first months of the project. Three research methodologies were developed and adhered to:

1. Quick scan of MSPlatforms (MSP) (this is referred later to as "Structured Scan")
2. Deep dive into 4 MSP
3. Network analysis

An analytic framework guided all methodologies and is summaries in the figure in Appendix 1. In addition a website was set up to share all findings: www.msplatforms.org. This website will be continued into 2021. Key documents will be transferred to the website of Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation in 2021, after which the website will be shut down.

Milestone 2

Mapping and selection of MS platforms and literature review completed.

Deliverables: Inventory of MS platforms and approaches to gathering evidence. Initial visits to 2 priority platforms. Agreements with 4 priority platforms.

Achievements: 75 potentially relevant MSP were identified, structured scans were carried out of 38 such MSPs. Findings were written up in 3 documents, describing the MSPs, general observations and the methodology should any other party continue to expand on the overview.

Visits were carried out to SAGCOT (Tanzania), Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) (Italy) and Bonsucro (UK). Agreements were made to carry out deep dives with SUN (HQ and Indonesia), Farmers to Market's Association (FTMA), Bonsucro and Zambia Business in Development Fund (ZBIDF).

Milestone 3

On-going sharing of findings.

Deliverables: Workshop session on platforms and sector governance at SFL summit (2016).

Achievements: At the November 2016 Sustainable Food Lab summit in Tanzania a plenary session on MSPs and collaboration was carried out.

Milestone 4

Generic and individual Theories of Change and platform assessment approaches constructed.

Deliverables: Overall platform typologies and ToCs. General structures for analysing platforms. Individual ToC and evidence base for 4 selected platforms.

Achievements: A generic paper on MSP typologies was written based on the Structured Scans. A detailed methodology was finalised for the deep dives and followed for the MSPs mentioned in Milestone 2. See Milestone 6.

Milestone 5

On-going sharing of interim findings.

Deliverables Collaboration on partnership conference with PPPLab.

Achievements: This conference was not held as the PPPLab decided not to go ahead with this from their end.

Milestone 6

In-depth assessment of priority platforms and revision of platform assessment completed.

Deliverables Assessment of platforms using generic approach.

Achievements: For each MSP on which a deep dive was carried out a detailed report was written and verified with the MSPs. These have been shared with Rockefeller Foundation through the project portal. They will be placed on the

Milestone 7

Proactive sharing of findings.

Deliverables: International workshop in collaboration with lead partnership centres. Workshops with 4 selected platforms. Workshop sessions with platform leaders at international fora.

Achievements A workshop with all 4 deep dive platforms October 2017. Members of the research team took part in 2 GIZ run workshops on MSPs in 2017 and 2018 and shared outcomes at an IDS workshop June 2018.

In 2020 an academic paper (using own, additional funds) was written, currently this has been submitted to the journal "Sustainable Development".

Currently a "Guidance to assessing the effectiveness of MSPs" document is being developed based on work done through this project. (own funding).

Yieldwise requested the project to hold on a closing workshop, so that it could be potentially integrated in long-term plans to run an event with the Vatican on Food Loss and Waste. While this event did take place in November 2019, in the end the event organisers chose not to include the topic of multi-stakeholder collaboration in the final programming. By the time this became clear this project had been closed and a final workshop could no longer be organised.

1.2 Additional achievements

Beyond the agreed milestones it is good to emphasise that the project lead to valuable additional outputs, the result of extra effort and creativity of the research staff. These include:

- The 3-part series written as a result of the Structured Scans. The (online) database of the food and agriculture platforms makes it possible for others to get a quick overview of which MSPs are working in this domain, and what key characteristics are. The Methodology paper contributes to general methodology development on how to assess food/agriculture platforms in a structured manner and facilitates others wishing to carry out a comparison.
- An additional networking analysis was carried out, which revealed the strong overlap in membership of many platforms. This revealed a new angle for considering the effectiveness of MSPs: to what extent does membership of any given platform take findings and priorities to other platforms and influence agenda's there?
- For each deep dive a public document has been made, which adds to the body of useful case studies others can draw on.
- The pending scientific publication on how to assess the effectiveness of MSPs is an important evidence-based contribution to a question many raise, but few have worked on.
- The pending Guidance paper will fill a need for MSPs to help keep their focus on their role in contributing to system-change, and making sure they remain on target.

2 Relevance to the outcomes, learnings and impact for Rockefeller Foundation and the YieldWise initiative

The grant agreement provided both the wider context of Rockefeller Foundations mission and priority areas of action, as well as that of Yieldwise. From the Foundations mission the following points are relevant:

- *"To advance inclusive economies that expand opportunities for more broadly shared prosperity, especially for those facing the greatest barriers to advancing their well-being.*
- *To build resilience, enabling people, communities and institutions to be prepared for, withstand, and emerge stronger from shocks and chronic stresses."*

"We aim to inform public policy through support for research, advocacy, and coalition building. Many of our interventions take advantage of tipping points and break bottlenecks that are impeding progress. We also seek to create an enabling environment for our work by fostering innovation, convening partnerships, and building networks."

The outcomes of this research are relevant to the wider work of the Rockefeller Foundation in coalition building, in particular when investing in multi-stakeholder partnerships. The lessons learnt (described below) are relevant to many MSPs. Rockefeller Foundation can help MSPs to make sure they orientate the platform towards contributing to system change and do not lose themselves in initiating all kinds of field-level projects, which could just as well be implemented by any of the platform partners on their own.

Yieldwise focused on the following four dimensions of a strategy to tackle food loss and waste.

- *Linking smallholder farmers to market demand of both large anchor buyers and local alternative markets.*
- *Aggregating farmers to train them in postharvest management, promote their adoption of technologies, and aggregate their crops to meet buyer quantity and quality requirements.*
- *Using innovative finance mechanisms to promote agricultural investments and facilitate distribution and acquisition of technologies, particularly among smallholder farmers.*
- *Promoting the adoption of appropriate loss-reducing technologies to improve crop handling, storage, and processing.*

Although none of these points foresaw in setting up national platforms or MSPs, during the course of Yieldwise this possibility emerged. It was hoped this "Enhancing the effectiveness of MSPs" program could contribute to the development of potential Yieldwise partnerships.

During the course of 2018 a number of discussions with YieldWise were held about where collaboration in the three countries were at in terms of sector-wide collaboration, and whether partnerships were ready to become more formalised. YieldWise reached out to the leading parties in Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania to discuss the usefulness of input from this program. In both Kenya and Tanzania it became clear that there was not yet sufficient collaboration to warrant the initiation of sectoral platforms.

There was only a possibility in Nigeria. Findings from this program were shared and discussed with Pyxera, who lead the tomato sector FLW reduction efforts. They considered drawing us into a planned national tomato partners' workshop in 2018, but in the end concluded that the partners in the sector were not yet interested in formalising their transaction-based relationships in a national platform. The MSP focus of this project proved, in the end, too far removed from the technical and market-focus of Yieldwise to be of direct value.

3 Lessons learned

Assessing the effectiveness of MSPs is often weak

Despite gaining popularity, there is little evidence on agri-food MSP effectiveness in terms of achievement of overarching goals. The broad nature of the MSP arrangements and the complexity of the targeted problems means that assessing effectiveness is difficult and often neglected. Efforts have focused instead on the mechanics of putting MSPs in place. However, good design and performance are necessary but insufficient conditions for impact.

Among the few studies which do seek to assess agri-food MSP outcomes, most focus on local level innovation and value chain platforms. None have assessed the effectiveness of MSPs engaged across multiple countries globally, or seeking broader transformational change.

A realistic Theory of Change is essential

One core finding from the work done so far is that it is clear that MSPs need to have or be working on a realistic impact pathway or theory of change to be able to develop a clear understanding about what they would need to assess to know about their effectiveness. The ToC needs to be clear on the overall challenge that requires the platform to be established (the purpose and goals), and what the role and contribution of the MSP is (the mission). Most MSPs have no, poor or imprecise ToCs that have not been validated or are unknown to most members. That creates a situation in which 1) it is hard to know whether they are being effective in reaching goals, and 2) it is hard to work on the basis of a shared understanding about visions, orientations, and intentions as partners.

Solid leadership support is needed, in conjunction with strategic planning cycles

Those managing MSPs need to clearly signal that learning processes around effectiveness are a priority, including by demonstrating reflexive thinking and taking learning into account in future decision-making. Assessing effectiveness is a strategic issue and not just a matter of checking progress against predefined targets. Since assessments are typically part of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) efforts, the MEL needs to be used and applied in a strategic way. It is about knowing how the MSP is performing in view of the agreed purpose of and mission for it. Yet typically MEL is approached as a mere tick-box activity and not used as a tool for strategic learning.

Assessing effectiveness can be done much more effectively with little extra effort

The processes developed in this project are designed and tested to be feasible for application in typical MSPs using existing information. Although MSPs may benefit from initial external guidance, the processes do not require specialist tools or expertise, and are in fact most valuable if they are conducted with and by MSP participants and stakeholders.

Funders have an important role to play

Clearly donors and other MSP funders are legitimate in asking MSPs to show accountability for the use of the funds they receive. Proposed use of ToCs and contribution stories can be used as part of these accountability mechanisms. However, often multiple donors and funders contribute to an MSP, each with their own reporting requirements., MSPs are therefore forced to develop multiple reports and regularly adjust their activities to generate outputs that meet donor reporting requirements. Donors and funders may need to be engaged regarding what constitutes credible and acceptable evidence in the context of complexity, that is in line with the purpose of a MSP. This is especially true where funders are used to, and often demand, a simple set of indicators, with metrics from before and after interventions as the main mechanism for tracking results.

4 Challenges and responses

The following key challenges emerged during the project. We describe how this shaped the project through the way we chose to respond.

Making clear that the focus of the project was on HOW to assess

Among most parties we spoke to and worked with there was the expectation that this project would say something about the effectiveness of MSPs.

We needed to continuously clarify that we were not carrying out an evaluation, but a methodological study that could then be used to inform the design of robust evaluations.

Gathering useful starting information on how agrifood MSPs currently assess effectiveness

Initial quick scans of agrifood MSPs revealed that almost none had any kind of public, structured manner of evaluating their own effectiveness. Existing MEL work tended to focus on describing activities and results, with little to no consideration of outcomes, impacts and the relative contribution of the MSPs.

This meant there was no possibility for creating a basis for comparison regarding current practice that could work as a starting point for the study.

We therefore put extra effort into developing a structured approach for how to assess effectiveness, and see if/how MSPs were following this in some kind of way.

Getting MSPs to engage in deep dives

Only a few MSPs were interested in collaborating on this study. Most did not see the strategic value (also see next point) or were too busy trying to comply with donor evaluation requirements to be interested in reflection.

We needed to be patient and persistent to find the right moment in the MEL cycles of those MSPs that we were in direct contact with to engage in a deep dive. Rockefeller Foundation allowed us a no-cost extension to make the inevitable delay possible.

Raising the topic to the necessary strategic level

Almost everyone relegated this topic to their Monitoring & Evaluation department. However, this did not align well with the strategic questions with which this process starts, namely considering whether the work undertaken is relevant and appropriate for a platform.

In one case (Bonsucro) we were able to work with (members of) the MT so that it received the input necessary and to be of real influence on the MSP. For others our entry point was the M&E lead, we did not manage to engage with MT level staff.

Getting funder/donor interest

While multiple parties expressed interest in the topic, very few were willing to put time or funds into this. We think this points to a wider lack of interest to really reflect on the relative value of MSPs as compared to other forms of collaboration to tackle complex problems. For example, while SDG 17 refers explicitly to the importance of Partnerships for the SDGs, Target 17.16.1 "Number of countries reporting progress in multi-stakeholder development effectiveness monitoring frameworks that support the achievement of the sustainable development goals" has insufficient data to be monitored. We can only regrettably note that we did not manage to develop a compelling story that brought together interested parties. We think this will only change when there is a wider urgency to more explicitly demonstrate the real value of MSPs.

5 Compliance with the terms of this Grant Agreement

Overall the grantee has largely complied with all the terms of the grant agreement: milestones, deliverables and use of funds. Until the end of 2018 reporting terms were also adhered to. A financial report was provided for the period April 2016 – January 2019 in the first half of 2019.

An unfortunate combination of circumstances between the end of 2018 and the present day led to non-compliance with the final reporting requirements, clarified below. Yieldwise has kindly delayed imposing sanctions to allow this final report to still be submitted.

- On October 11 2019 a cost-free extension of the project until Jan 31 2019 was requested, to complete the deep dives and final reporting.
- At the end of 2018 WCDI was asked by the then Director of Yieldwise, Rafael Flor, to further extend the project until the end of 2019 in order to be of relevance to an emergence conference with the Vatican.
- Despite engaging in initial discussion on the purpose and design of the conference, a role for this body of work was not included in the final program.
- This led to lack of clarity about closure of the project. Yieldwise chose to retroactively close the project as of January 2019.
- By this time, at the end of 2019 and into 2020, the project lead Joost Guijt was on extended sick leave. On returning to work he focused on further content development of this project, i.e. the mentioned publication and Guidance publication.

We hope that with this report it will lead to satisfactory closure of a valued opportunity for the research team.

Appendix 1 Analytical framework

Appendix 2 Process for assessing effectiveness

The following process can be followed using capacities and data/evidence already present in most MSPs. This was the basis for the deep dives carried out during this project.

Wageningen Centre for Development
Innovation
Wageningen University & Research
P.O. Box 88
6700 AB Wageningen
The Netherlands
T +31 (0)317 48 68 00
www.wur.eu/cdi

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